

Global warming legislation and the Employee Free Choice Act

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You were one of 152 Members of Congress to sign a letter addressed to Speaker Nancy Pelosi detailing the desired principles of global warming legislation. What suggestions does the letter make in regard to how cleaner energy and technology could positively affect the economy?

Anticipating a drastic change in the White House, congressional Democrats last year began setting the stage for climate control legislation. The letter you ask about was sent to the Speaker in October and lays out the four main principles we believe must guide any legislation efforts on global warming.

The principles won't be anything new to Santa Cruzans, who have long supported these values. First, reduce emissions to avoid dangerous global warming. Second, transition our country to a clean energy economy. Third, recognize and minimize any economic impacts from global warming legislation. And fourth, aid communities and ecosystems vulnerable to harm from global warming.

Your question focuses specifically on the positive economic affects of legislation, which is the right way to look at this issue. Unfortunately, many critics of climate change legislation argue that the economy can only be damaged through reform. I have always argued against that point of view. Reform can be comprehensive and still beneficial for our businesses.

First, a clean energy economy is a modern economy. It means we're applying best practices to how we run our businesses, including the employment of the latest technology advancements. The business world calls this an investment. I recognize there will be costs associated with reform, but taking no action is not an acceptable alternative.

I also recognize that when we use taxpayer dollars for the public good, we must be both fair

and transparent. Any revenue generated must be returned to consumers and our communities, and our businesses must be protected against any trade disadvantage that evolves from reform.

But I believe we have the will, the knowledge and the necessity to make sure these reforms are successful. Our future depends on it.

The latest version of the Employee Free Choice Act was presented to Congress on March 10. What are your chief reasons for supporting the bill, which, if passed, would make it easier for employees to join and form unions?

I have always believed that employers who treat workers with respect and dignity and pay them a fair wage will have happy employees. And happy employees have no reason to unionize.

But in some workplaces, the drive for productivity and profit can trump the value of the worker. That's when we find workplaces that don't value the worker and can even lead to dangerous working environments. And it's those working environments where legal unionization drives are often met with the same attitude that created problems in the first place. And it's those situations where the Employee Free Choice Act is necessary.

The goal of the Employee Free Choice Act is simple-make certain our economy is fair for all workers by providing the tools they need to achieve fair wages, benefits and treatment. I'm a supporter of this bill because it will help us achieve that level playing field. This bill works toward that goal in three ways.

First, when a majority of workers agree to form a union, it must be possible to do so without coercive pressure. Currently, the only way to form a union is through a lengthy election process, which can provide anti-union employers the opportunity to frustrate organization efforts. While a majority sign-up process is legal, employers are allowed to veto any unionization decision workers make. We must ensure both the election process and the majority sign-up process are available to workers.

Second, the legislation will ensure that after a union is formed, an initial union contract is a realistic possibility. There is no obligation that employers reach an agreement, so new unions often have no contract after years of bargaining. The Free Choice Act calls for the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service and binding arbitration when bargaining breaks down.

Finally, we must strengthen penalties for violations against workers. Currently, the National Labor Relations Board must seek a court injunction against a union if there is cause to believe the law has been violated, but the same is not true for employer violations. The playing field must be leveled to protect workers.

I firmly believe that businesses have nothing to fear from the Free Choice Act, which just offers workers the rights they deserve.